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White House to Take Over

WASHINGTON — Of all the brains washed in the whirlpool of the Vietnam war, those in the Central Intelligence Agency have come out, well, relatively clean.

Early in the war, according to the Pentagon Papers, the CIA said that the domino theory — the belief that a communist takeover in South Vietnam would lead to the fall of San Francisco — was hokum.

When the Pentagon was telling us that all the fight was about out of the North Vietnamese and the National Liberation Front, the CIA was not so sanguine.

And long before then Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara was admitting it in public, the CIA was saying that bombing would not significantly hamper the ability of the North Vietnamese to fight.

All of which means that when the CIA wasn't too busy on other intrigues it was right on its assessments of the war, at least some of the time. And it displayed some independent thought.

But even that limited record of success may be jeopardized in the future, says Rep. Lucien Nedzi of Michigan, Democratic chairman of the House subcommittee which oversees intelligence operations.

Nedzi has spent more than a year in a private, intensive study of the nation's intelligence organizations, especially the CIA.

And now that its director, Richard Helms, whom Nedzi considered a professional with no political axes to grind, has been banished to the desert — as ambassador to Iran — the congressman worries that the White House is about to "compromise the integrity" of the agency.

MORE SPECIFICALLY Nedzi and other members of Congress are concerned that the agency may become a handmaiden of administration and Pentagon policy, telling the White House only what it wishes to hear.

Several members of congressional Armed Services committee, including Nedzi, know how the White House and the Pentagon have juggled their own intelligence estimates of Soviet strength — while ignoring more accurate CIA figures — to justify requests for new weapons systems.

For example, there were the frightening Defense Department estimates of the Soviet SS-9 intercontinental missile, which were used as the prime argument for the anti-ballistic missile system.

Well, the ABM has all but sunk from sight — and so has the threat of the SS-9.

Evidence that the White House may be moving to take over the CIA for its own purposes came to Nedzi last year when the President announced an intelligence reorganization to increase efficiency and eliminate waste, duplication and some inter-agency feuding.

Nedzi concedes that more co-ordinating and reorganization may be necessary. But he learned that none of the agencies, not even the CIA, had been consulted about the reorganization.

Indeed, the CIA, which knows some of the most sacred secrets of our sworn enemies and other foreign governments, knew so little about the reorganization plan that it had to learn about it by sending out for a copy of Newsweek.

The White House, when it announced the reorganization, kept secret the name of the man who planned it. It since has been learned that the author of the plan was James R. Schlesinger, Helms' successor.

Schlesinger has assured concerned members of the Senate Armed Services Committee that the CIA, under his directorship, will remain independent. But skepticism remains...

Schlesinger, with no background in intelligence work, did not talk with members of Congress or leading experts in the field before he wrote his reorganization plan. Presumably those were his instructions from the White House.

Schlesinger, at the time of the study, was chairman of the Atomic Energy Commission, which under his leadership has shown no disposition to challenge the administration's unstinting support for more nuclear power plants — in spite of mounting evidence for a more cautious policy.

BEFORE JOINING the AEC, Schlesinger, a Harvard graduate (no relation to Arthur), was assistant director of the White House power center, the office of management and budget.

An economist and a Republican, Schlesinger had been a senior staff member of the RAND Corp., a Pentagon think-tank in California, and later director of strategic studies there, before joining the administration in 1969.

At RAND Schlesinger was chiefly concerned with problems of budget and management in government and was an admirer of McNamara's cost-effectiveness-system analysis approach.

Nedzi figures the CIA and other intelligence outfits could use a super-manager like Schlesinger. But he doubts that Schlesinger will run actual intelligence operations and policy, and whether the White House, even occasionally, will be listening to something it doesn't wish to hear.

CIA?